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Christian Attitudes to Marriage. From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium, by Peter Coleman, edited by Michael Langford. London: SCM, 2004. 269pp. pb. £18.99. ISBN 0-334-02956-2.

Current debates about marriage and sexuality usually proceed in a way that prevents them paying attention to the rich kaleidoscope of past human experience. Intimacy, sexuality, and issues about these, whilst governing large sectors of privatised modern Western societies, appear strange to earlier cultures. At the very least, those categories can provide only one part of a convincing account of human relationships. Also, by focusing discussion on private matters inalienable from human personality that make no significant impact on the interests of other people, they create an intrusive public discourse. John Stuart Mill termed such private matters 'self-regarding', and argued that they should not be subject to regulation by public bodies. Peter Coleman avoids these twin hazards by focusing on a tangible public institution with a clear genealogy, and thus offers a much-needed antidote to current debate. His study provides an impressive historical survey, including sections on: Israel's Inheritance from its Near Eastern Neighbours, the Old Testament, the Classical World, Judaism Between the Testaments, the New Testament, Constructing the Christian Ethos, Christendom, the Reformation, and Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II.

In the Ancient Near East, where his account begins, marriage was preceded by betrothal, which consisted principally of a financial contract. This included a bride price due to the father to compensate loss of services, an endowment to support the new wife, and a dowry to meet her future needs in case of divorce or widowhood. Divorce was indeed common in the Mesopotamian states, as provision for it in marriage contracts suggests, though normally the husband's prerogative: in the Babylonian (Hammurabi) code, a wife who made the proposal could be cast into a river and drowned. In Egypt, wives enjoyed considerable independence, being able to own property and even sue their husbands. Penalties for adultery, however, were as harsh as the Babylonian ones, but applied equally to both parties: not only the unfaithful wife could be fed to crocodiles. Disagreement about the relative status of the marriage partners persisted in early Judaism, with the two different creation stories the source of tensions between rabbis. In the first Priestly account of Genesis, God creates Man and Woman together, whereas in the second Jahwist narrative, Woman is created from the rib of Man. Even so, Man then clings to Woman in order to recover his missing part. Anachronistic modern readings of the Jahwist account are exposed: in particular, the one-flesh relationship between man and wife is not specifically sexual, but expresses family kinship. When Laban

hails Jacob as ‘my bone and my flesh’, there is no suggestion that they share a sexual relationship. Moreover, in early Hebraic law, chastity was obligatory only for the wife, and so only in her case did a sexual relation imply a marital one. The dual standards converged in the post-Exilic era, however.

Classical Greek philosophy treated sex and sexuality in a matter of fact way, though a general licentiousness should not be inferred from this: women, for instance, wore a short veil for modesty. In early Rome, seduction was punished more severely than rape, on the grounds that seduction undermined the marital system, and women were agents in it, whilst assault harmed just one person. By the time of the consolidation of the Empire under Caesar Augustus, marriage as the transfer of authority (*manus*) over a woman from father to husband had been replaced by free marriage (*sine manus*), which required simply the couple’s consent. Since transfer of property out of the bride’s family no longer formed part of the arrangement, divorce by mutual agreement became easier, and women were allowed ‘to own, inherit and dispose of property, and engage in business and professional life’.

Competing views of the desirability of marriage began to emerge during the Intertestamental period. Some rabbinic commentary argues from the Priestly account of the simultaneous creation of Man and Woman that only *together* do they bear the divine image: God alone is self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the Priestly tradition in practice excluded women from active participation in the public worship that formed the focus of civic life. Jesus’s teaching, so clearly opposed to the dual standards for men and women, is radical when viewed in this context. The break he effects with Jewish practice should not, however, be overstated. In particular, the episode of the woman caught in adultery can be misleading. The penalty of death by stoning for adultery was part of Mosaic rather than contemporary Jewish law, and like many theoretically harsh sanctions for sexual offences, had rarely if ever been invoked when in force. No legal provision for the stoning of the woman existed: the suggestion is made to precipitate legal and moral argument. Following the death of Jesus, as Christian identity was progressively formed, the difficult question arose of how to reconcile Jewish and Gentile marriage practices. The Jerusalem Council responded by turning to the Noachic law code established prior to the Torah. Particularly striking is Coleman’s insistence on Paul’s positive theology of the body, which draws heavily on I Corinthians, including the suggestion that Paul might have been a widower rather than unmarried (I Cor 7.8-9).

During the patristic era, a fundamental reappraisal of marriage occurred under the influence of Stoicism, Neoplatonism and Christian eschatology. Self-sufficiency was no longer considered a property of God alone, but a way of living to which humans might aspire

if possessed of a sufficiently strong spiritual motivation and desire for heavenly citizenship. Chastity, it was argued, provided a means for the soul to escape from its corrupt earthly body to share in resurrection life. This theology is supported by Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose and others, who identify the virginity of Jesus and Mary as exemplary, and by Jerome, who infers that the apostles were all either celibate, or chaste in their marriages. Against this background, Augustine is not the guilt-ridden critic of sensuality frequently portrayed, but the theologian of a workable doctrine of marriage for later Western Christendom as it sought to regulate human relationships and sexuality. To validate a marriage in the West, consent between the couple, parental agreement and witnesses were all that had traditionally been needed, with consummation an additional requirement amongst Germanic cultures. Nevertheless, the position of chief witness became the prerogative of a local priest, so that by the thirteenth century the Church was principal arbiter of who was married and who was not. The impetus for this shift seems to have been political rather than religious: the requirement that a priest be present, rather than just lay witnesses, was written into the later Tridentine marriage decree *Tametsi* only following fifteen sessions and exhaustive debate. The priestly role in marriage thus became similarly decisive to that in the Orthodox tradition, though for political reasons and not spiritual ones. Even so, Coleman estimates that in England, as late as the Reformation, one third of marriages were still constituted on a customary or common law basis with no ecclesiastical involvement. Cranmer's injunction in the *Book of Common Prayer* that the couple, along with their friends and neighbours, come into the body of the church for a solemnization service, rather than remain outside the porch for a blessing, can be seen as part of the Reformers' affirmation of the goodness of marriage. Martin Luther, for instance, believed almost everyone to be called to marriage, and only one person in every several thousand to chastity. Nevertheless, the movement through the porch accentuated the distinction between church and civil marriage, and in so doing made possible the contrary inference that the only good marriage was a church one.

The final chapter of the study, focusing on England from the Elizabethan Settlement to the present day, was left unfinished by Coleman, and therefore leaves various questions open for debate. He invites the reader to reflect on different understandings of the relation between 'tradition' and 'modernism', and consider the extent to which a 'traditional' theology of marriage can or should compromise with 'new morality'. A more critical appraisal of 'traditional' (i.e. modern!) marital ideals might emerge from such a consideration. Church marriage did not become mandatory in England until the Hardwicke Act of 1753, which (excepting Quakers and Jews) was intended to restrict the ministries of dissenting clergy and

clarify inheritance rights. Although many of its social aims were laudable, the new legislation fatally undermined the historic notion of marriage, at once theological and civil, as being constituted by the mutual consent of the couple in the presence of peers. Coleman refers to the view of Christian marriage 'at least officially' in a couple of places, but questions need to be asked about whether the 'Christian view' is embodied in church documents or in the actual practice of people who call themselves Christians. The historical account that Coleman provides suggests, in any case, the need for far greater criticism of the legalistic, profligate display of social and ecclesiastical power that the declining numbers of modern church marriages and preparations for them have typically become. Many of the burgeoning numbers of relationships not solemnized in church but recognised by family, friends and neighbours, certainly have more in common with historic Christian practice.

If Western churches are to return to a historic theology of marriage, they will need to redefine their role in purely spiritual terms, such as providing the newly-married couple with the eucharist, or a blessing for their home. They will also need to recover an understanding of marriage as being one amongst a range of meaningful kinship relations, including community living and same-sex relationships. Wedded brotherhood, for instance, persisted well beyond the Reformation. The suppression of its liturgies and removal of memorials to people of the same sex buried together has been well documented by John Boswell, Alan Bray and others, and formed a key part of the elimination of all politically significant relationships that were not contracts with the state, which provided the logic of modern government. Particular relationships might or might not have been sexual: who knows, and who cares? The new Church of England marriage rite, in its self-conscious anxiety to echo the preoccupations of wider society, replaces the traditional description of a couple forming 'one flesh' with a reference to 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union' that is dreadful even by current liturgical standards. In fact, living as 'one flesh' suggests a whole range of shared, embodied experience - eating, caring, listening, speaking, cleaning - that could be summed up simply as living together in mutual recognition.

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Exeter